



On Jim Redd's 700-acre Mt. Pleasant row-crop and livestock farm, a bobwhite quail moves through a 50-foot-wide strip of native warm-season grasses (NWSG) Redd installed as part of a Natural Resources Conservation Service and Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency cost-share program. Redd says wildlife is thriving in the 28 acres of NWSG "buffers."

Next to a dense, neat-as-a-pin field of soybeans, the 50-foot-wide strip of vegetation that separates the crop from the tree line appears slightly unkempt. The grasses are tall, leggy, and growing in sprawling clumps. Decomposing, year-old cornhusks and stalks are plainly visible on the ground, shaded by the occa-

sional plume of waving grass or yellow-flowered woody growth.

To someone with a different perspective — the strip is flat-out ugly. To Jim Redd, it's a thing of beauty.

Looking over his Maury County soybean fields that are bordered with a variety of native warm-season grasses (NWSG) and shrubs, Redd's younger-than-his-81-years countenance lights with a wide grin.

"This is just great!" he says. "It's the perfect marriage of agriculture and wildlife habitat. I'm thrilled to death with the progress we're making here."

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) figures, Redd is one of more than 16,000 Tennessee landowners who have participated in USDA and Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) conservation cost-share programs over the past decade to improve wildlife habitat on their properties and in their communities. Initiatives like

the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) are helping to convert low-production cropland into fiscally profitable wildlife areas, protect fragile fresh-water streams and lakes, and prevent soil erosion.

Not only do these programs provide much-needed human help to re-establish dwindling populations of upland game bird species — especially bobwhite quail — landowners and farmers can benefit financially, says TWRA Clint Borum.

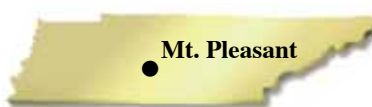
"There hasn't been a better time than right now for people who want technical and financial assistance with improving wildlife habitat on their farms to take action," says Borum, who is based out of the Murfreesboro office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the organization that administers the programs. "There are more opportunities and better cost-share programs than ever."

Borum and Jeff Bowie, district conservationist with the Maury County NRCS office, have helped dozens of area landowners like Redd realize a vision of creating a vibrant wildlife habitat without compromising agricultural production.

"It's a fairly simple process to initiate," Borum explains. "A farmer might call me and say, 'I need some help. I have a four-acre area off this bean field that's being decimated by deer,' or, 'I plant my corn right up to the woods, but the trees are shading the plants and drawing out the nutrients and water. I'm not getting any production and, with fuel and other input costs, it's actually costing me money to plant it.'"

After visiting with the landowner and assessing the property and farming requirements, Borum — or one of the other three TWRA biologists in Tennessee who help facilitate the programs — will draft a comprehensive plan and make recommendations accordingly.

"Once we find out what that



According to TWRA wildlife biologist Clint Borum, native plants like this partridge pea provide food and cover for a variety of animal species.



LEFT: Borum says low-production field edges like this one on Redd's farm are the perfect places to install wildlife buffers. In addition to increasing wildlife populations, annual NRCS rental payments may provide a greater return for landowners than poor-yielding cropland. **RIGHT:** Redd calls his farm a "perfect marriage of agriculture and wildlife habitat." He leases his property to Robbie Ingram, an area farmer who produces 700 acres of row-crops, pasture, and timber.

landowner wants to accomplish with that particular piece of property, we can sit down and design a management plan that best fits his or her goals and desires," says the wildlife biologist.

In the spring of 2009, Borum and Bowie put together a proposal that would allow Redd, an avid dog-trainer and hunter, to replace his long-standing, labor-intensive routine of planting annual food plots on portions of his 700-acre row-crop and beef cattle farm near Mt. Pleasant.

"Frankly, the work was wearing me out!" says Redd, a Nashville business-owner and member of Maury Farmers Cooperative who leases his property to Mt. Pleasant producer Robbie Ingram. "I had heard a little about these TWRA programs but didn't know much. Clint and Jeff came out and toured the farm, and we sat down and went over some options."

Using a combination of the CRP, EQIP, and WHIP programs (see color box on next page), Borum and Bowie designed a plan for the "perfect" habitat that would be more affordable and beneficial to wildlife and easier to manage than an annual food plot.

"We wanted to create connectivity throughout this property by making travel corridors so that the entire farm would become functional for wildlife instead of just a pocket here

and there," explains Borum.

"We introduced permanent habitat by replacing poor-yielding crop edges and some fescue borders with native warm-season grasses and shrubs that offer the cover and food supply necessary to support a healthy quail population."

Although fescue and Bermudagrass have obvious benefits for farming and home landscapes, Borum explains that these forages are detrimental to most species of wildlife because of their dense growth and marginal nutrient content. Not coincidentally, he says, quail populations have steadily declined in the Southeast U.S. since Kentucky 31 fescue was introduced in the 1930s.

"Quail chicks can't move through a thick mat of fescue," he says. "If they can't get around and forage for insects, they will die. Native warm-season grasses like ragweed, big and little bluestem, Indiangrass, grama grass, and partridge pea attract the insects that chicks feed on almost exclusively during their first six weeks of life in addition to providing easily navigated cover from predators like hawks, bobcats, coyotes, and even house cats."

Aside from the ecological benefits of reintroducing NWSG and other types of wildlife-friendly vegetation, Borum stresses that programs

appeal to the typical landowner's checkbook as well.

"If you are a row-crop farmer, you have to make your living off of corn, beans, wheat, and cotton — that's the bottom line," he says. "By converting low-producing field edges into habitat, not only are you receiving monetary reimbursement, you're likely to increase yields and maximize production on the other portions of your farm."

Redd adds that his actual and projected costs of installing the approximately 28 acres of field buffers and other upcoming work are negligible after the NRCS reimbursements.

"There has been very little out-of-pocket money involved, and the results have been exactly what I was looking for," says Redd, who purchases all of his inputs and equipment from

Maury Farmers Co-op. "This farm is not only producing quality crops and livestock, but it has become a showplace for natural resources and wildlife."

Borum says Redd's farm serves as a perfect model of how conservation programs work seamlessly with agricultural production.

"Remember, the ground that we're primarily interested in is ground that [University of Tennessee] Extension data shows as nonproductive from a monetary standpoint for farmers," he says. "We want to help farmers avoid burning more money in diesel, seed, and herbicide than they would make from the harvest on poor cropland. If a producer can receive annual payments for that same ground and get wildlife production off of it, I see that as a win-win situation."



From left, Redd, TWRA biologist Clint Borum and Maury County NRCS District Conservationist Jeff Bowie inspect the NWSG growth in Redd's wildlife buffers. Planted only last spring, the plant populations will become more dense over time, says Borum. After the third or fourth year of growth, he says, a prescribed burning or light disking may be needed to keep the buffers in the proper vegetative state.

More about conservation cost-share programs

Although there are several specific U.S. Department of Agriculture programs related to wildlife conservation, the majority of Tennessee's federal dollars go to the "big three": Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Mark Gudlin, private lands liaison for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, says most farms will qualify in part for at least one of these programs — if not all three — and landowner participation is crucial to the environmental health of the state.

"The benefits to our wildlife populations are obvious," says Gudlin, "but there are other

equally important outcomes as well. For example, field-border filter strips eliminate or minimize erosion on both tillage and no-till farms while filtering chemicals that may wash into streams. By using native warm-season grasses [NWSG] and shrubs like elderberry, flowering crabapple, sumac, and wild plum in these filters, landowners are providing habitat that wildlife will move into, either sooner or later. The fact is, as long as there is no usable habitat, there is no chance of wildlife ever utilizing it. CRP, EQIP, and WHIP are economically sensible options for farmers, in particular, to increase their wildlife and ag production. These programs address not only cropland, but offer



Some 16,000 landowners in the state have participated in conservation programs since 2003, says Mark Gudlin, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency private lands liaison.

good and profitable practices to apply to hay, pasture, and woodlands as well."

How they work

- CRP includes several practices that provide technical and financial assistance to eligible farmers and ranchers to address soil, water, and related concerns on their lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. For CRP's continuous sign-up program, the landowner must own the property for at least one year, and the land must have been cropped for at least four years between 2002 and 2007. Farmers and ranchers receive an annual rental payment for the term of the multi-year contract in addition to reimbursement for a percentage of the initial establishment costs. Many of the continuous sign-up practices have additional signing bonuses and/or increased rental rates.

- EQIP is more focused on livestock production. Besides installing environmental systems like cattle crossings and wildlife buffers, the program also promotes conversion to

NWSG in forage systems in rotation or for hay production, particularly in marginally productive fescue fields. University of Tennessee Extension research shows that varieties like big and little blue stem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass provide higher protein and yields than fescue and thrive during the hot months when fescue becomes dormant. EQIP generally provides up to 75 percent reimbursement of establishment costs. There are also forest management practices in EQIP.

- WHIP is primarily utilized by non-agricultural landowners who want to establish wildlife habitat on their property. It provides up to 75 percent reimbursement of establishment costs of NWSG areas and other practices. WHIP contracts generally last from five to 10 years.

For detailed information about any of these NRCS environmental cost-share programs, go to www.twraprivate lands.org or contact the district conservationist at the NRCS office of the county where your property is located.



At the May 22, 2009, Bradley Soil Conservation Field Day at Dean Skelton's farm in Cleveland, Bradley and Polk County District Conservationist Wayne Coats discusses cost-share practices related to livestock like this newly constructed cattle crossing.

Hunting and fishing on Nov. 2 ballot

Among the issues Tennessee voters will decide on Election Day — Nov. 2 — is a constitutional amendment calling for hunting and fishing to become a protected right for state residents.

"All the way back to ancient Rome, democratic societies have recognized the individual rights to hunt and fish," says Mike Butler, treasurer of the Tennessee Wildlife Heritage Fund, the organization campaigning for the bill. "To date, 14 other states have this right in their state constitutions, and four others, including Tennessee, have the 'Right to Hunt and Fish' amendment on the ballot for 2010."

Butler points out that as the state's population becomes more urban and suburban, more residents — and future legislators — are losing their "connection" to the land and their agrarian roots.

"We may not always enjoy the fundamental support of hunting and fishing that we have today, and an amendment will protect this valued tradition for future generations," says Butler.

For more information, visit www.huntandfishtn.com.



This bumper sticker is among several promotional materials available for download at the Internet home of the Tennessee Wildlife Heritage Fund. There is also a comprehensive frequently-asked-questions page detailing the proposed bill as well as a list of sponsors and supporters.